WAITING

December 1, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 1:5-20

"...stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."
--Luke 21:28 (NRSV)

At exactly 9:40 a.m., last Friday, not this past Friday, but Friday, November 22 - nine days ago - the Salvation Army cornet player in front of Water Tower Place began her daily struggle with the strains of "Silent Night, Holy Night." By this Wednesday, she will have been at it for the full "Twelve Days of Christmas" - and we're only in the first week of December.

There is, someone noted, a distinct dissonance between church and culture as the ancient and lovely season of Advent begins. Across the street - it's Christmas morning: "Deck the Halls with boughs of holly - fa, la, la." On our corner it's "Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand;..." Over there it's "Joy to the World." On our corner it's "O come, O come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel,..."

The challenge is to let Advent be Advent: to attend to the wisdom of the ages, the traditional music, and the Advent texts which want to take us places we would not choose to go before we arrive in Bethlehem. Advent themes are exile, captivity, loneliness, barrenness. The colors in the church are not yet red and gold - but purple. The music is in a minor key.

A Lutheran pastor wrote an essay in the Christian Century last week, recalling her distress at being called away from her home in the midst of a particular happy occasion with her children, baking Christmas cookies. The call was to go to the hospital to visit a critically ill patient. She went and spent a wonderful half-hour with him, as he talked about his long and good life, and his death, and his hope. It was hard, she said, but very important. She returned to her festive home. "I took a deep breath. There mingled with the smell of evergreen and Christmas baking was the smell of victory over death."

"Here's an Advent fact," she concludes. "You cannot find the fullness of Christmas until you wander through the thoughts of last things and feel the pain and taste of fear, and then hold them out to the healing power of God's love." [Christian Century, "Last Things First," Margaret Payne, 11/20-27/91, p. 1085]

So, I bid you to Advent.

The Advent texts this year will all be from the first two chapters of the Gospel according to St. Luke. Just a word about it. No one knows, of course, how the material in the Gospels came to be written down. But scholars do note that Luke's book seems to begin comfortably and classically with what is now chapter three. The conclusion is that later he added the accounts of the nativity. No one knows why. My private theory, based on absolutely nothing but my own reading, is that he didn't know about the birth story until someone told him. And the only person who could have told him when he wrote his book around 70 A.D., the only person still alive who was actually there, was an old woman - whose name was Mary. She remembered it all as if it were yesterday. And I think she read Luke's book with its classic beginning, "In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor..." And she went to see him and told him the real beginning of the story, the way she remembered it.

This we know: it is exquisitely written in the best Greek in the New Testament. Luke has arranged the story around a sequence of canticles, or hymns, which the Christian Church has loved for 2,000 years -

- The Magnificat, Mary's song,

- Benedictus - Zechariah's joy at his son's birth,

- Gloria in Excelsis - the angels' song and

- Nunc Dimittis - Simon's song as he cradled the baby.

And Luke introduces us to a wonderful cast of characters: Herod, Joseph, Mary, Shepherds, Simon, Anna... and Elizabeth and Zechariah.

The story begins with an old priest and his wife. His name is Zechariah. He is one of perhaps 20,000 Jewish men who were priests. It was not a full-time job. Priests served in the Jerusalem Temple in shifts. It was customary to be assigned Temple duty, one week a year. The men lived in the Temple and carried out a sequence of daily sacrifices and rituals such as lighting incense.

Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, was well connected. They were good people, kind and honest. They were - Luke puts it delicate-

ly - getting on in years. They had no children. Now in 1991 we affirm intentional life styles that do not include children or marriage. But not then. Elizabeth's situation is defined by a particularly powerful Hebrew word, "barren." Barrenness was thought to be a sign of God's disfavor. A childless couple must be guilty of something. Barrenness in Israel was grounds for divorce. And so the simple fact that Zechariah and Elizabeth are still together tells us something about their love and devotion and maybe their undying hope.

They were still waiting - long after there was any reason to hope. Can't you imagine a young Jewish couple, expecting the familiar signs of God's gift of pregnancy, giggling and planning to spring the news, when it came, on happy parents and grandparents? Can't you imagine how it was when all their friends produced babies and how they waited each month and how those months became years? Can't you imagine the not-so-subtle accusations: "Really, now, Elizabeth, isn't it about time?" "Zechariah, old boy, didn't anybody ever tell you how to get the job done?"

Ten, twenty, thirty, forty years. The time for children was long gone. The grandparents and hopeful parents are long dead. But there is something about Zechariah and Elizabeth that will not give up. Even though they know better, even though their minds assure them that it is absolutely silly, they go on hoping, waiting and expecting and praying.

And then, in a dizzying, crazy moment in the Temple, while he's lighting incense, Zechariah knows. He hears a voice, or sees a figure. But it's very dark and smoky in there and you can't see very clearly. But whatever happens to the old man, he knows and he can't tell anybody about it because when he emerges from the smoky sanctuary he's lost his voice - or maybe he now believes something so outrageous that he wouldn't dare try to tell about it. Anyhow, Zechariah knows Elizabeth is pregnant and he can't talk; and when he goes home after his week of temple service he can't find her; she is not at the door waiting; she's in bed, where she stays for five months, scared to death. "You're not going to believe this, Zechariah, but I think I'm going to have a baby." And all the old man can do is nod his head and grin as big tears, which have been waiting for forty years to appear, flow down his cheeks.

What's that story doing in Luke's introduction to the life of Jesus? Why, if I'm correct, did Mary remember it after all those years and tell it to Luke so he would get it right? Well, for one thing Elizabeth was a relative of hers, and for another, Elizabeth's son, John, known as the Baptist, would be a prophet. Mary's son, Jesus, would be fascinated by him, in fact baptized by him. John would turn out to be his mentor and inspiration and John would die, violently, at the hands of the authorities, not long before her son, Jesus, died. But the story is in there also

because it has to do with basic human experience: high expectation, disappointment, isolation, hope, waiting, experiences which in one way or another are reflected in the lives of every man and woman who ever lived. The story is there because there is not a one of us who is not in some way waiting.

It's not an easy assignment. Americans are not good at waiting for anything. Economists tell us that our impatience continues to hurt us in competitive international markets. Short term, quarterly profit and loss statements claim our attention and shape our decisions and people who plan long and wait patiently - are doing it better. Watching baseball teams fire, hire, trade and recruit is a fascinating exercise in impatience for a winner next season, in conflict with the wisdom of patient development over the years.

Waiting can be painful. A traffic jam, a delayed flight, a doctor's appointment can result in high stress, irritability and sometimes irrational behavior. Ironically electronic high tech - which in a sense made us victims of this inevitable rushing and then waiting - can save us, or at least alleviate the pain. I know a man who never drives to O'Hare without his lap-top computer on the seat beside him, and can type memos and letters in even a mild traffic delay. The delayed flight sends everybody scurrying, no longer to the bar, but to a corner where the cellular phones emerge. People do business in their cars, waiting for cabs, even after the salad waiting for the entree... And I have learned the secret of never allowing them to take you from the physician's waiting room to the examination cubicle without carrying along a briefcase full of work to do while you are sitting there, shivering in lonely exile.

We are not very good at waiting for anything. And so it is no surprise that what begins at Thanksgiving is not Advent but Christmas. And that the weeks ahead are not characterized by waiting and reflecting, but rushing, hustling, bustling; the very busiest time of the year.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth suggests, however, that in spite of our frantic impatience, there is a sense in which waiting and anticipating at a deep level is a life-long reality. Think of how much we invest in it - children wait for school, to grow up, to have a date, drive a car, wait for graduation, and college and adulthood, and freedom. We wait for romance, significant relationships, love and marriage, we wait for career opportunities, business success, financial security, and then we wait for retirement. And through this life-long waiting there is always a relentless sense of anticipation, that it will happen, whatever it is for us - love - career - success - sex - happiness - contentment - or a child.

That's what's going on here. That's what Advent intends to touch in you. That place where you are waiting. That place in your life which can be described in these words:

> "...O come, Emmanuel,
> And ransom captive Israel,
> That mourns in lonely exile here..."

You may not be able to talk about it much. You may find that it is difficult to articulate the deepest yearning in your heart. You may find it difficult to admit that the comfortable life style you have so intentionally assembled is not "it" at all. Or you may be so busy that you have never understood it fully yourself other than that occasional restlessness and emptiness.

Whatever form your waiting and yearning takes for you, Christian faith thinks it knows what it really is. What you really yearn for - wait for, hope for - is for love to come and make sense of your life. What you really are waiting for, beneath all the hyperactive impatience of life in the city, is for some sense that in a world where indifference and injustice and unnecessary suffering and unexplainable tragedy meet you every day, the center is stable and love is real and your own life has purpose. What we really wait for as we sit in the darkness of December is light - light to see and to warm and to illuminate.

And the message is this. The love and light you wait for has come, long ago, in the birth of a child... and still comes, quietly, mysteriously, into the life of the world.

It left old Zechariah speechless until nine months later, when Elizabeth had a baby and Zechariah took him to the Temple and found his voice, and said - Benedictus:

> "Blessed be the Lord... he has visited and redeemed his people,... And you child,...will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,...to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,..." [Luke 1:68, 76, 79]

And so - come to Advent. Come and sit a while in the darkness. Come and live with the dissonance. Come and prepare for the mystery that in a child's birth in Bethlehem of Judea years ago... our waiting is over.

> "O come, Thou Day-spring, come and cheer
> Our spirits by Thine advent here;
> Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
> And death's dark shadows put to flight.
> Rejoice! Rejoice!
> Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel!"